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ABSTRACT

The study applied a stress and coping model including acculturation to understanding the predictors of depressive symptoms, alcohol use, and life satisfaction of 108 native Salvadorans who immigrated to the United States in the past 5 years. Acculturation was negatively related to depression and alcohol use, and positively related to life satisfaction. Life stress was negatively related to life satisfaction. Perceived social support and support-seeking coping were negatively related to alcohol use. Problem-focused coping was negatively related to depression and alcohol use, and avoidance coping was positively related to depression. Also, an acculturation by support-seeking coping interaction predicted depression and life satisfaction. Low support-seeking at low levels of acculturation was related to the highest levels of depression and lowest levels of life satisfaction. The results suggest the utility of coping and supportive interventions to improve the mental health of recent Salvadoran immigrants. (Contains 1 figure, 3 tables, and 20 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Acculturation, Coping, and Psychological Adjustment of Central American Immigrants

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Abstract

The study applied a stress and coping model including acculturation to understanding the predictors of depressive symptoms, alcohol use, and life satisfaction of 108 native Salvadorans who immigrated to the U.S. in the past five years. Acculturation was negatively related to depression and alcohol use, and positively related to life satisfaction. Life stress was negatively related to life satisfaction. Perceived social support and support-seeking coping were negatively related to alcohol use. Problem-focused coping was negatively related to depression and alcohol use, and avoidance coping was positively related to depression. Also, an acculturation by support-seeking coping interaction predicted depression and life satisfaction. Low support-seeking at low levels of acculturation was related to the highest levels of depression and lowest levels of life satisfaction. The results suggest the utility of coping and supportive interventions to improve the mental health of recent Salvadoran immigrants.

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Acculturation, Coping, and Psychological Adjustment of Central American Immigrants

Approximately one half million Salvadorans have immigrated to the United States since 1980 (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1993). The political and economic turmoil from a civil war has encouraged high rates of migration and made Salvadorans one of the fastest growing immigrant groups. However, many lack legal documentation and have no legal claim to services that might assist in their resettlement. Even when documented, Salvadoran immigrants continue to face obstacles such as cultural differences, language barriers, unemployment, and discrimination (Padilla, Cervantes, Maldonado, & Garcia, 1988). In addition, few studies have examined the psychological adjustment of recent Salvadoran immigrants.

Little is known about the specific stressors that are experienced by Salvadoran immigrants. Padilla et al. (1988) examined the psychosocial stressors experienced by Mexican and Central American immigrants to the United States. These immigrants reported that unemployment was the most common stressor followed by lack of understanding of the English language. In addition, they reported that they knew very few people who could help with employment, learning English, or childcare. They also responded about coping with these stressors. In coping with unemployment, the most common response was to seek assistance from family and friends and to look for a job, wherever or whatever it might be. In coping with lack of English language skills, the majority indicated that they preferred to attend school to learn English, but they most often just listened to others speak English. These responses suggest a preference for active problem solving and support seeking to cope with stress, and also the use of passive coping.

Receipt of social support is another way that Salvadoran immigrants cope with the stress of recent immigration. Leslie (1992) investigated the role of informal networks in the adjustment of recent Central American families and found that these networks may have an insulating effect that diminishes immigrants' interactions with the larger community. She found that adaptability correlated positively with percentage of kin in the network and proximity of network members. The larger the percentage of kin in the network and the further away the network members lived, the higher the adaptability score. The association between physical distance and family adjustment was attributed to families being able to establish a residence that is accessible, but separate from, network members. Studies involving Hispanic populations have also revealed that neither the availability nor use of support is predictive of psychological distress, but satisfaction with support was negatively related to symptomatology for Mexican immigrants (Vega & Kolody, 1985).

Some research suggests that the level of acculturation might have direct effects and interactive effects with stress and

coping variables to predict psychological adjustment and alcohol use. Acculturation has been defined in many ways, with most definitions suggesting that it involves a change of culture. Padilla (1980) has suggested that acculturation consists of cultural awareness such as understanding of language and familiarity with social customs, and ethnic loyalty which includes preference of one culture over another and self-identification. Berry (1980) has proposed a three-phase process of acculturation involving contact, conflict, and adaptation. He suggests that immigrants resolve cultural conflict by adapting their previous language, cognitive styles, personality, identity, and attitudes to those more characteristic of the dominant culture. Through the process of making shifts in these areas of functioning, immigrants are thought to experience acculturation stress. Acculturation may be positively related to psychological adjustment because the learning of language and social customs may facilitate employment and participation in a social network that in turn helps one to meet personal needs and limit psychological symptoms. In addition, previous research has indicated that less acculturated Hispanics consume higher quantities of alcohol than more acculturated Hispanics, Whites, and Blacks (Neff, 1986). Also, one might expect that changes in cognitive styles and attitudes due to acculturation are likely to affect one's coping efforts and perceptions of social support.

No study to date has used standardized measures of acculturation, life stress, coping, and social support to understand recent Salvadoran immigrants' psychological adjustment to living in the United States. The purpose of this study was to examine whether these variables significantly predicted adjustment for Salvadorans who had immigrated to the U.S. in the past five years. We utilized a stress and coping model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) which has been applied to understanding Mexican-American mental health (Cervantes & Castro, 1985) to predict the psychological adjustment of Salvadoran immigrants. Specifically, we hypothesized that reports of acculturation, social support appraisals, and problem solving and support seeking coping would be negatively related to depression and alcohol use, and positively related to life satisfaction. Also, we hypothesized that life stress and avoidance coping would be positively related to depression and alcohol use, and negatively related to life satisfaction. Further, we hypothesized that these stress and coping variables would interact with acculturation to predict depression, alcohol use, and life satisfaction because we expected increasing acculturation to change the appraisals of life events and coping options.

Method

Participants

One hundred eight Salvadorans who had immigrated to the U.S. within the past five years (mean of 3.1 years) participated in this study and the majority were legal immigrants (67%). The primary motives for immigration were to meet economic needs (47%), to gain political freedom (34%), and to be with other

family members (19%). The majority of the participants were male (59%) and ranged in age from 18 to 50 years (mean was 28.2 years). The majority did not have a high school diploma (73%) and the mean level of education completion was 8.2 years of formal schooling. The majority of the sample was not married (59%). The number of people living in the participant's homes ranged from 1 to 7 (mean of 3.1). The annual income reported by participants ranged from $0 to $25,000.00 per year with a mean income of $10,960. Only 3% of participants reported speaking English very well, 11% reported speaking well, 51% reported speaking enough to get by, and 36% reported that they did not speak English but understood it. The level of education and type of employment of participants (mostly service providers) were similar to U.S. census estimates (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1993).

Procedure

The recruitment procedures were similar to those used by Leslie (1992). Announcements of the study were made at English as a Second Language (ESL) classes held in Virginia and Washington, D.C., community agencies that served recent Salvadoran immigrants, and Spanish-language church services in Maryland. In addition, recruitment included door to door canvassing of residential areas and places of business where Salvadorans were present. In this study, 56 percent of the sample were obtained through door to door canvassing of businesses and residential areas, and 44 percent were recruited through local churches, ESL classes, and community agencies. Respondents were paid five dollars each for participating and were given a list, in Spanish, of available social, health, and legal services in their community.

The purpose of the study and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality of responses were reviewed verbally in Spanish and participants read a passage written in Spanish with the same information. All questionnaires and measures were administered in Spanish by bilingual administrators. Bilingual college students, majoring in psychology, assisted the authors in the administration and translation of measures. Measures which had not already been translated to Spanish underwent forward and back translation procedures to ensure that conceptual equivalencies of the scales were obtained (Padilla et al., 1988). Measures and questionnaires were distributed to participants in small groups or individually and required approximately 60 minutes to complete. One or more Spanish-speaking administrators read directions out loud and assisted participants in understanding the items.

Measures

Acculturation. The degree of acculturation was assessed with the Cultural Life Style Inventory (CLSI; Mendoza, 1989). The CLSI is a 29-item measure that assesses five factors: intra-familial language use, extra-familial language use, social affiliation and activities, cultural familiarity and activities, and cultural identification and pride. Each item was rated on a

five-point scale (e.g., 1 = only Spanish; 2 = more Spanish than English; 3 = Spanish and English equally; 4 = more English than Spanish; and 5 = only English) with higher scores indicating more acculturation. The low point corresponds to cultural resistance and maintenance of native customs, the mid-points correspond to cultural incorporation which is adapting customs from both native and alternative cultures, and the high point corresponds to cultural shift which is a substitution of alternate cultural norms for native customs. In the present study, the coefficient alpha for the entire scale was .93.

Life Stress. Life stress was measured with the Immigrant version of the Hispanic Stress Inventory (HSI; Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1991). The HSI is comprised of 73 items across five specific life domains: occupational/economic, parental, marital, immigration, and cultural/family conflict. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale (from 1 = "not at all" to 5 = "very much") with higher scores indicating more life stress. To save time and to limit the number of nonapplicable items for the unmarried participants, only the immigration stress scale (18 items), the occupational/economic stress scale (13 items), and the cultural/family conflict scale (13 items), were used. In the present study, the coefficient alpha was .92 for this abbreviated total scale.

Social Support. Perceived social support was assessed with the Social Support Appraisals Scale (SS-A; Vaux et al., 1986). The SS-A is a 23-item instrument designed to measure the extent to which an individual believes that he or she is loved by, esteemed by, and involved with family, friends and others. Each item was rated on a 4-point scale (1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree) with higher scores indicating more support. In the present study, the coefficient alpha was .86.

Coping. Coping behaviors were assessed with the Coping Strategy Indicator (CSI; Amirkhan, 1990). The CSI is a 33 item measure which assessed the use of problem solving, seeking social support, and avoidance to cope with recent stressful events. Participants rated the items on a three point scale (1 = not at all, 2 = a little, and 3 = a lot). For the present study, the coefficient alphas were .90 for problem focused coping, .90 for support-seeking coping, and .82 for avoidance coping.

Depression. The Spanish translation of the revised Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck & Steer, 1993) was administered to assess depressive symptomatology. The BDI consists of 21 items (rated 0 - 3) with higher scores indicating more depression. In the present study, the coefficient alpha was .96.

Alcohol Use. The quantity and frequency of alcohol use were measured with items adapted from the Adolescent Alcohol Involvement Scale (AAIS; Mayer & Filstead, 1979). Participants were asked about their use of beer, wine/wine coolers, and hard liquor. Specifically, an eight point scale was constructed for frequency of substance use (0 = never drink to 7 = drink every day). In addition, participants responded to items concerning quantity of alcohol use for beer, wine/wine coolers, and hard

liquor during a typical drinking experience. These items were rated on an eight point scale (0 = none to 7 = more than six drinks). In the present study, the coefficient alpha was .98.

Life Satisfaction. The Extended Satisfaction With Life Scale (ESWLS; Allison, Alfonso, & Dunn, 1991) was used to measure satisfaction in five areas: general life, social life, sexual life, relationships, and self. The ESWLS consists of 25 items and five items assessed each area of satisfaction on a seven point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). In the present study, the coefficient alpha for the entire scale was .95.

Results

Table 1 provides a description of the predictor and criterion variables derived from the questionnaire. This table includes the scale's item means, standard deviations, observed ranges, and possible ranges.

Insert Table 1 about here

In the preliminary analyses, analysis of variance was used to test whether the predictor and outcome variables differed by the demographic variables of gender, marital status, motive for migration, and immigration status. Men reported significantly more alcohol use than women ($F(1,106) = 22.16$, $p < .01$). Abstinence from alcohol use was reported by 72% of the women and 26% of the men. Also, unmarried participants reported higher levels of acculturation than married participants ($F(1,106) = 8.07$, $p < .01$). In comparisons by motive for migration, significant main effects were found for acculturation ($F(2,105) = 4.83$, $p < .01$) and total life satisfaction ($F(2,105) = 3.37$, $p < .05$). Specifically, post-hoc comparisons indicated that participants who reported immigrating to be with their families reported significantly higher levels of acculturation ($t(105) = 2.38$, $p < .01$) and life satisfaction ($t(105) = 2.40$, $p < .05$) than participants who immigrated for economic reasons. In comparisons by legal status, participants who claimed possession of legal documentation reported significantly higher levels of acculturation ($F(1,106) = 4.42$ $p < .05$) and life satisfaction ($F(1,106) = 6.34$, $p < .05$) than those who claimed illegal status.

Pearson correlations were also calculated to assess the degree of relations between participant's age, years of formal education, personal income, and degree of English fluency with the predictor and outcome variables. Age was positively correlated ($r = .37$, $p < .001$), and years of education was negatively correlated ($r = -.28$, $p < .01$), with alcohol use. There were no significant relations between participant's personal income and English fluency with the predictor and outcome variables. Because there were no systematic differences in the outcome variables by the demographic variables they were not partialed in later regression analyses.

Predictors of Depression, Alcohol Use, and Life Satisfaction

Pearson correlations were calculated to assess the degree of

relations between the predictor variables of acculturation, life stress, perceived social support, and coping and the outcome variables of depression, alcohol use, and life satisfaction. Table 2 shows the intercorrelations of these variables. The results of these analyses indicated that acculturation was negatively related to depression and alcohol use, and positively related to life satisfaction. Life stress was negatively related to life satisfaction. Perceived social support and support-seeking coping were negatively related to alcohol use. Problem-focused coping was negatively related to depression and alcohol use, and avoidance coping was positively related to depression.

Insert Table 2 about here

Next, the total variation in measures of depression, alcohol use, and life satisfaction as accounted for by the main effects of acculturation, life stress, social support, and coping, and the two-way interactions of acculturation by each of the stress, social support, and coping variables were calculated with three separate hierarchical multiple regressions. All predictor variables were centered. These regression results are presented in Table 3. Acculturation was entered first and accounted for significant variance in depression (7%), alcohol use (5%), and life satisfaction (5%). Life stress was entered second and account for significant incremental variance in life satisfaction (3%) only. Social support was entered third and accounted for significant incremental variance in alcohol use (5%) only. The coping variables were entered as a set fourth and accounted for significant incremental variance in depression (9%) and alcohol use (6%). Problem-solving coping was a significant predictor for both depression and alcohol use. Avoidance coping was a significant predictor for depression. The full set of two-way interactions of acculturation by life stress, acculturation by social support, and acculturation by each type of coping was entered fifth and accounted for significant variance in depression (5%) and life satisfaction (3%). In both equations, the interaction of acculturation by support seeking coping was the only significant interaction.

Insert Table 3 about here

To depict the interaction of acculturation by support seeking on depression, we followed the procedures recommended by Cohen and Cohen (1983, p. 323) and computed depression scores for the predictor variables that were one standard deviation above and below the mean in the regression equations. Figure 1 shows the results of these calculations. As can be seen, Salvadoran immigrants who reported support seeking scores that were above the mean showed little difference in depression scores, regardless of whether they reported low or high levels of acculturation. In contrast, immigrants who reported support seeking scores that were below the mean reported higher

depression when acculturation was at a low level, whereas those who reported high levels of acculturation reported low depression. A similar figure was obtained for the interaction of acculturation by support seeking on life satisfaction in which the combination of low support seeking and low acculturation was related to the lowest life satisfaction.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Discussion

The results of the present study provide support for the utility of a stress and coping model including acculturation to understand the psychological adjustment and alcohol use of recent Salvadoran immigrants because acculturation, life stress, social support, and coping were related to these outcomes. In addition, there was an interaction of acculturation by support-seeking coping which predicted depression and life satisfaction.

These findings that acculturation was negatively related to depression and alcohol use, and positively related to life satisfaction, are consistent with previous research which has indicated that acculturation is an important factor to consider in understanding the mental health of Hispanic immigrants (Cervantes & Castro, 1985). For example, Padilla et al. (1988) found that Mexican and Central American immigrants specifically identified difficulty adapting to the culture as one of the major problems they experienced during their first year in the U.S. Mendoza (1989) has suggested that acculturation can be monocultural which is the process of acquiring the customs of an alternate society, or it can be multicultural which is the process of incorporating the customs from native and alternate societies. The distribution of responses on the acculturation scale had a narrow range with participants indicating either maintaining Spanish language and customs entirely or incorporating both Spanish and English language and customs. There were no scores indicating cultural shift which is a substitution of alternate cultural customs for native customs. Thus the sample appears to be moving toward a multicultural identity. This identity may be associated with greater psychological adjustment because it facilitates a sense of control and predictability of events in one's life.

The negative relation between acculturation and alcohol use is consistent with previous research that less acculturated Hispanics consume higher quantities of alcohol than more acculturated Hispanics, Whites, and Blacks (Neff, 1986). Also, men consumed significantly more alcohol than women. This was partially due to the fact that the majority of women reported abstinence from alcohol use similar to other research with Mexican and Central American women immigrants (Cervantes, Gilbert, Salgado de Snyder, & Padilla, 1990-91). However, it should be noted that the alcohol measure used in this study was based on self report. In future studies it may be useful to substantiate self reports of alcohol intake since participants

may be underreporting in order to give socially desirable answers.

There was also evidence that perceived social support was negatively related to alcohol use. Previous research has found that Hispanic men were more likely to ascribe tension-reduction and enhanced social acceptance properties to alcohol use when compared with non-Hispanic men (Caetano, 1984; Cervantes et al., 1990-91). It is possible that high levels of perceived social support may decrease the need to use alcohol as a social lubricant.

Life stress was significantly negatively correlated with life satisfaction only. This is an interesting finding since, in the development of the stress measure used for this study (Hispanic Stress Inventory, Cervantes et al., 1991), a significant correlation was found between stress and a measure of depression. This finding may be partially explained by a demographic difference between the two samples. Specifically, less than half of the immigrant sample in the previous study was Central American, and, in the current study the entire sample was from El Salvador. The current sample may have experienced a greater amount of strife in their country of origin than immigrants from Mexico or other Latin American countries. The stressors which they have encountered in the U.S. likely pale in comparison to their previous experiences and have a less depressogenic effect. Further research is necessary to understand the specific ways in which Salvadorans define and experience stressful events in comparison with other immigrants.

This study was apparently the first to use a standardized measure of coping strategies in exploring the psychological adjustment of Salvadoran immigrants. Coping was shown to account for a significant amount of variance in the reports of depression and alcohol use of participants, beyond that accounted for by acculturation, life stress, or social support appraisals. Problem focused coping was negatively related to depression and alcohol use, and avoidance coping was positively related to depression. One might expect that active forms of coping are more likely to change life circumstances in desirable ways than passive coping will. There is some evidence that Hispanics may use alcohol to relieve or cope with depression (Neff, 1985) and thus problem focused coping may be a more adaptive substitute.

There was also a significant support-seeking coping by acculturation interaction to predict depression and life satisfaction. Low support-seeking at low levels of acculturation was related to the highest levels of depression and lowest levels of life satisfaction. Some research indicates that, in the case of Central American immigrants, social support functions to alleviate feelings of uncertainty associated with immigration by providing needed information, resources, and affiliation (Leslie, 1992). It is likely that the ability to obtain resources is greatest for those who are most acculturated and allows for increased independence and less need for support. For example, Griffith and Villavicencio (1984) found that more acculturated

(English-speaking) Mexican Americans, when compared with less acculturated (Spanish-speaking) Mexican Americans, relied less on their extended family network for support. Also, the combination of low acculturation and low support-seeking may be indicative of a relatively passive person who perceives less personal control and has less success in achieving personal goals, which may in turn relate to depression and dissatisfaction with life.

The results of this study highlight several important areas for future research. First, future research on Salvadoran immigrants could improve its sampling of the population. The current study was limited by lack of access to a larger geographical area and to a lack of a comparison group. It is unknown how this sample compares to the total population of Salvadoran immigrants and other Central American immigrants in North America. This study was also limited by the use of measures which were developed and standardized for use with either predominantly Anglo populations or predominantly Mexican populations. An important area of future research is in the development and standardization of instruments that measure stress, coping, and psychological adjustment in other populations of Hispanics, such as Salvadoran immigrants. Finally, although expensive and time consuming, it is important to conduct longitudinal research with Salvadoran immigrants in order to better understand the processes which lead to positive and negative outcomes in this population. For example, immigrants might be followed from the time preceding their immigration, through the process of migration, and until several years after settlement in the U.S. This might allow researchers to identify patterns that lead to cultural adaptation and psychological adjustment and to test causal models. Identifying such patterns would provide important information to clinicians which could help guide the development of interventions.

The results of the current study suggest the need for preventive and/or clinical intervention with Salvadoran immigrants. First, since acculturation was found to be positively correlated with adjustment, interventions might focus on educating newly arrived immigrants to speak English and understand the cultural norms and laws of U.S. society so that they can better meet economic, family, and individual needs. Second, because men reported more alcohol use than women, it is important to identify Salvadoran men who are likely to be at greater risk for problem drinking and provide interventions for them. Interventions for both men and women might focus on teaching adaptive coping strategies and facilitating social support. Finally, educating the communities, into which these immigrants enter, about the plight of their new neighbors is also important in reducing barriers such as cultural differences and discrimination (Padilla et al., 1988). Leslie (1992) has suggested that the stress of international migration experienced by Central Americans is primarily addressed by social support networks established after their arrival in this country.

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Table 1

Description of Major Variables (N = 108)

Variable	M	SD	Observed Range	Possible Range
Acculturation	2.07	0.36	1.00 to 3.14	1 to 5
Life Stress	2.01	0.51	1.00 to 3.45	1 to 5
Social Support	2.94	0.41	1.55 to 4.00	1 to 4
Problem-Focused Coping	2.02	0.48	1.09 to 3.00	1 to 3
Avoidance Coping	1.74	0.39	1.09 to 3.00	1 to 3
Support-Seeking Coping	2.05	0.42	1.00 to 3.00	1 to 3
Depression	0.43	0.54	0.00 to 2.05	0 to 3
Alcohol Use	1.00	1.53	0.00 to 6.46	0 to 7
Life Satisfaction	4.62	1.10	1.76 to 6.76	1 to 7

Table 2

Correlations Between Psychosocial Predictors and Depression, Alcohol Use, and Life Satisfaction (N = 108)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Acculturation	--								
2. Life Stress	-.12	--							
3. Social Support	.22[a]	-.31[c]	--						
4. Problem-Focused Coping	.17	-.05	.24[a]	--					
5. Avoidance Coping	-.06	-.08	.16	.65[c]	--				
6. Support-Seeking Coping	.05	.17	.14	.46[c]	.40[c]	--			
7. Depression	-.27[b]	.00	-.18	-.21[a]	.23[a]	.00	--		
8. Alcohol Use	-.27[b]	-.02	-.23[a]	-.34[c]	-.14	-.22[a]	.56[c]	--	
9. Life Satisfaction	.23[a]	-.21[a]	.17	.18	.02	-.01	-.51[c]	-.42[c]	--

[a]$p < .05$; [b]$p < .01$; [c]$p < .001$.

Table 3

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Depression, Alcohol Use and Life Satisfaction (N = 108)

	Depression			Alcohol Use			Life Satisfaction		
Variables	R^2 Change	F Change	B	R^2 Change	F Change	B	R^2 Change	F Change	B
Step 1	.07	7.67**		.05	7.07**		.05	5.53*	
Acculturation			-.264**			-.236**			.227*
Step 2	.00	0.11		.00	0.19		.03	3.71*	
Life Stress			-.031			-.043			-.185
Step 3	.02	2.28		.05	5.00**		.01	0.62	
Social Support			-.154			-.231**			.081
Step 4	.09	3.73*		.06	3.32*		.03	1.07	
Coping									
Problem-Focused			-.351**			-.336*			.244
Avoidance			.395**			.129			-.134
Support-Seeking			.048			-.079			-.058
Step 5	.05	5.86*		.00	0.30		.03	3.71*	
Acculturation by Support-Seeking			.218*			-.078			-.182*

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

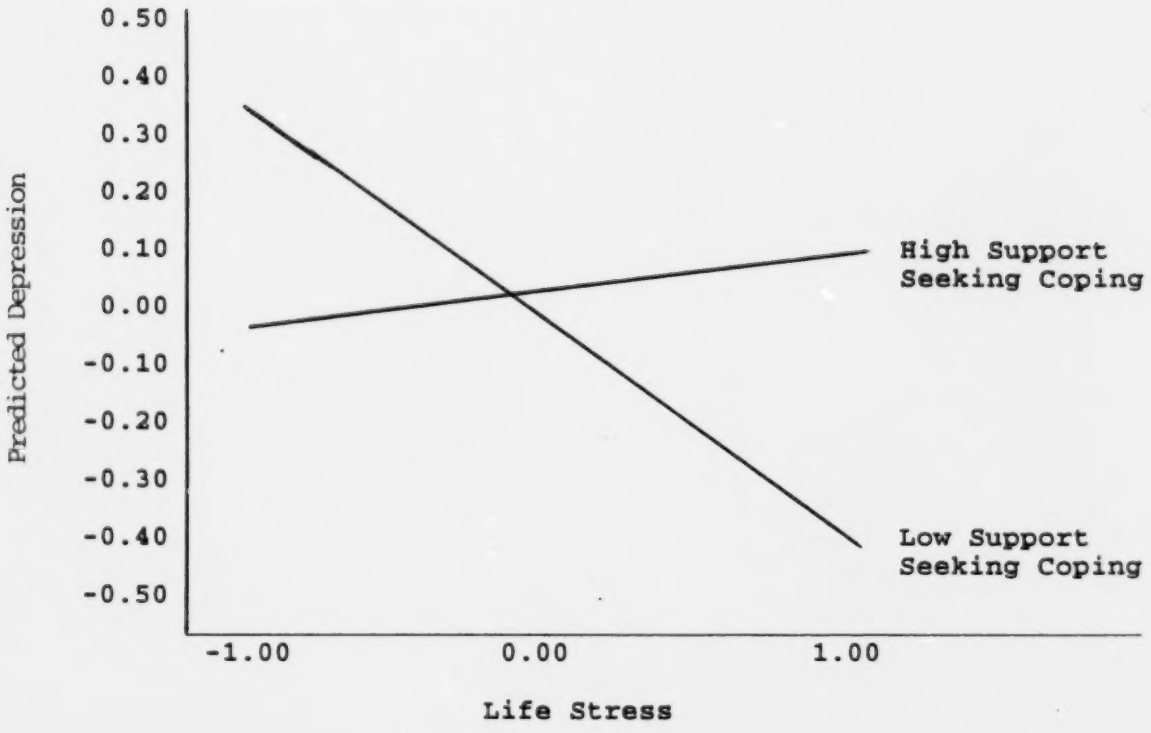

Figure 1. Interaction of Acculturation and Support Seeking Coping in predicting Depression. Simple regression lines are depicted at values 1 SD above the mean (High) and 1 SD below the mean (Low) on Support Seeking Coping.